Hero as Author in The Song *of Roland*

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A modern reader with no experience in medieval literature who received the unlikely gift of a copy of *The Song of Roland* might be given pause by the title. Is it going to be a song about Roland? Written by Roland? Sung by him? A simple confusion, quickly cleared up, and yet perhaps providential in the more serious questions it leads us to: Are there ways in which the hero Roland resembles a poet? How might the oliphant function as the text's counterpart within the text itself, and who is the audience? What light could this approach shed on interpretive controversies? A comparison of Roland's situation and that of the writer of the epic is somewhat outside the critical fray, and need not attempt to trump more strictly ideological or linguistic examinations. At the same time, its own answers to commonly disputed critical questions may complement the answers other approaches have provided.

It will be necessary first to clarify a few points that can no longer be taken for granted. I will be assuming, as most scholars do, that this work is based on an event that actually took place. I will be examining what I see as its departures from a less self-consciously artistic recording of the event, which seem to lean away from mimesis toward invention. Clearly, historical truth is chimerical, invention a matter of degree and subject to the intricacies of patronage and contemporary aesthetic decorum. One does not have to establish "exactly what happened," though, to examine the differences between earlier and later accounts of a battle, especially when the later account in question diverges so extravagantly and uniquely from the earlier ones. It will not be necessary to criticize Eginhard's objectivity as a historian; for my purposes, a relatively rough distinction between his account of the battle at Rencesvals and the poem's will suffice.

Of the post-Eginhard inventions in *The Song of Roland,* one of the sheerest and most striking is certainly Roland's sounding of the oliphant. It is also the element within the narrative that saves the day for the Franks, by calling Charles and the main body of the army back to vanquish the attacking Saracens. Until the oliphant call, the battle has gone pretty much as it did according to Eginhard. The larger narrative has been streamlined and conventionalized by the substitution of Saracens for *Wascones* and by the endowment of warriors on both sides with similar arms and fighting styles; the enemies' greater numbers,

instead of their greater mobility, have come to account for their superiority on the battlefield; but the result is much the same: defeat for the Frankish rear guard. The sound of the oliphant near the middle of *The Song of Roland* is the element which, almost alchemically, changes defeat— as it would have remained for posterity, insofar as posterity would have bothered to inquire— to splendid and decisive victory.

It could be said that the clear note of the oliphant plays a role within *The Song of Roland* similar to that the epic itself has played within its various audiences. The horn is said to have a *"voiz... molt longe"* (1755), a *"longe aleine"* (1789), putting it at a remove from Roland even as he blows into it. It is played by a subject for a royal audience at once present and absent— Charles is at least a hundred miles away, too far even by the epic's own reckoning for a voice to carry by itself. Thus through a voice that is not quite his own, Roland transmits a message to the king and the greater part of the army, which has gone ahead to a place death will prevent him from going. Within the epic, this message lies dormant in the oliphant until activated by the performer's breath. Nor is the message a simple one: on the strength of hearing it alone, Naimon is given to know that Roland is not only threatened but already fighting *("Bataille i at, par lo mien escientre"* 1791), and to see through Ganelon's betrayal of Roland (1792), the act of treachery on which the entire plot hinges. Ganelon's spurious misrepresentation to the king *("Devant ses pers vait il ore gabant"* 1781) is a desperate act which makes his own understanding all the more apparent. Granted, his ruse suggests that the horn *might* be used in hunting or boasting as well as in war, but the immediacy of Naimon's and King Charles's correct "reading" shows how unlikely any other interpretation might be. Roland is a warrior now, not a hunter, and if (as many critics contend) he has been guilty of pride, his sounding the oliphant marks the end of his boasting. A horn blast might mean something else in another world, but not in this one.

If *The Song of Roland* is, as Goldin suggests, "a written text employing a number of oral formulas and themes" (35), a "transitional" work with characteristics of earlier as well as later modes of transmission, then the note that Roland plays on the oliphant bears a number of resemblances to it. His "performance" is reminiscent of oral recitation in the contemporaneity of its reception and of writing in the remove of its audience. The oliphant is "played," as a musical instrument (though, one would hope, a more appropriate one!) accompanying an epic singer might have been, before or after the introduction of vernacular writing; though no virtuoso, Roland is like a musician in his singular power over the instrument. In having a mouth and a voice, the oliphant itself

resembles a singer who relays a tale he has received; at the same time, like a written text, it enables Roland to send a message to an audience too far away to hear him without it.

It is too hard to resist noting here, without pressing the point, that even in their colors, an ivory horn decorated with crystal and gold (2296) and an illuminated parchment book might be said to resemble each other, especially if the book were given an ivory cover, as was sometimes the case. One inclined to speculate on unconscious associations might also make a great deal out of the poet's placing a book and an ivory chair next to each other in the Saracen camp: *"Un Jaldestoel i out d'un olifant / Marsilies fait porter un livre avant"* (609-610). The book referred to (and the only one that actually appears in the poem) is the Koran, the "anti-Bible," on which Marsilion swears to kill Roland.

Another parallel worth mentioning comes out of David MacKinnon Ebitz's historical study of the oliphant as a product of secular art in the middle ages. He notes that ivory horns were often given to churches, and that occasionally "the horns may have been recarved to add an appropriately Christian element to the decoration." One oliphant in particular which had already been decorated with beads and carvings of animals "was Christianized by the addition of an image of the Ascension ... carved in an entirely different style" (134-135). Many scholars have observed the church's somewhat similar effect on the Roland story, which in its chronicle form had no features of a crusade. Susan Farrier's study of linguistic strata, for instance, traces explicit comparison of Roland and Christ to the most recent of the three distinct poetic voices it finds contributing to the epic between the tenth and twelfth centuries (23).

Ebitz notes that it is in *The Song of Roland* that the ivory horn was first given the name "oliphan" or "olifans." He dates major production of the horns, and written references to them, to a brief period from the late eleventh century to the first half of the twelfth, which suggests that they might not have existed in Europe in the time of Charles and which, in fact, places their vogue remarkably close to the time, around 1125, when *The Song of Roland* was recorded in the Oxford manuscript. Ebitz infers from the well-preserved state of oliphants surviving today that "they were rarely used, which is not surprising when we consider how little practical satisfaction they offered the person blowing or drinking from them. Perhaps they were largely for ceremonial show" (125). If Ebitz's deductions from physical evidence are correct, the connection between the oliphant and the book is more than skin-deep. Though its entire

significance in the twelfth century is elusive, the oliphant's function as a symbol of nobility may have overshadowed its practical value. As a large, ornately carved, expensive, somewhat novel, and at least partly ceremonial implement, it was not only used by Roland within the epic but provided a sort of commentary on him to the medieval audience. One might justifiably argue that in *The Song of Roland* few objects of any kind are *without* symbolic significance. I would not pretend here that Roland's sword Durendal, for instance, did not also tell part of his story. But uniquely among the elements of this epic, the oliphant plays a double role in at once being an instrument of communication used by Roland and communicating independently of him.

Roland's use of the horn invests it indelibly with further meaning: it comes to intertwine, as no other object within the story could, the themes of loyalty and courage, patriotism, martyrdom, and the triumphs of good over evil and Christianity over Islam, as they have operated within the framework of this particular narrative. When Roland plays the oliphant, and when he later breaks the mouth of it against the head of an enemy, he is in a sense inscribing it with his own story. At the end of the poem, having soundly defeated the Saracens, Charles fills the horn with gold and pagan coins and places it on an altar in Bordeaux, where *"Li pèlerin lo veident ki la vont"* (3687). The story the oliphant tells has stretched, by virtue of its surfacing at this point in the narrative, to include events that took place after Roland's death, most importantly the Franks' absolute victory over the Saracens. Its audience has spread from a king and his army to include pilgrims and, by extension, all Christendom. Moreover, this new audience need not hear the horn, as Charles did, to appreciate it. Though the horn would be incapable of telling them its own story without interpretation (assuming no additional emblematic narrative has been carved into it), they have come to value the sight of it for the particular witness it bears to an event of great importance.

If the oliphant may be spoken of in some of the same terms as the text in which it appears, what about Roland himself? As I have suggested, he resembles an epic singer in his performance on the oliphant and a scribe in his investment of an inanimate object with meaning. My comparison of him to a poet will take into account the epic's status as an adaptation of historical narrative. Since it would be difficult for a serious discussion to consider *The Song of Roland* the work of any one poet, I will not attempt to draw any point-by-point comparisons between a conjectural author or authors of the epic and its hero. Instead, I would like to look for ways in which the artists whose work culminated in the Roland of the Oxford manuscript endowed him

with "poet-ic" aspects of their own images, and to see how these aspects might help account for some of his notoriously inscrutable behavior.

It might be said that the process of composition of *The Song of Roland* began the first time one person related the "historic kernel" of the epic, as Goldin calls it (4), to another. Even from the mouth of a soldier who might personally have witnessed the carnage, the story is bound to have been reshaped by point-of-view, predilection, experience, allegiance. Likewise, reconstructed in the mind of the listener it could never have had quite the same texture it had for the person who told it. Let us assume unrealistically for a moment that Eginhard alone, nursing a secret grudge against Charles, fabricated an event that had no historical foundation whatsoever. Still, his fiction could not avoid showing the "fingerprints" of his particular consciousness. His readers would not be able to help implicating an awareness of the author in their awareness of the tale. If they passed the story along, it could not be without passing along a little Eginhard with it. Consciously or not, one person who inherits a story from others, believing it to be grounded in fact, looks back toward that fact through many "mouths."

It is certainly possible, then, that in the case of *The Song of Roland,* the awareness of the story *as a story* would grow, over the three hundred or so years between its inception and its transcription in the Oxford manuscript, to become a feature of the text itself. If it is the case that the poem was passed along and, inevitably, revised by many poets, an idealized version of the poet who first told it might come to constitute a feature of its lost golden age of epic action and values. But even if a "Turoldus" single-handedly molded historical prose into epic, his raw material was not flesh but words. Concern with the relationship between history and its re-telling might grow especially prominent in the poems of a "transitional" period between oral and written traditions, during which poets were still absorbing the impact of their own literacy.

Unfortunately, we have next to nothing of *The Song of Roland's* pre-Oxford tradition before us on which to base a comparative study of metatextual elements. But given the fact of the writer(s)'s awareness of the story as such, and the complex workings of the oliphant within the story, perhaps I may be given license to work from the other end for a moment and see, if there were a self-conscious thread in the text, where it might lead.

From the second *laisse,* in which Marsilion asks his men to save him *"de mort e de honte"* (21), reputation is a primary issue. The point is not

unique to this work and need hardly be pressed. Rallying his men to battle in a famous speech, Roland cries, *"Male chancon de nos dite ne seit!"* (1014). On a very conscious level, then, the soldiers are aware of an audience for their heroism. They know that their song "will" be sung, and they devote their thoughts to it as they ride to their deaths.

The importance of the story that will be told operates together with an eerie sense that it already has been. Charles, for instance, knows from a dream that Ganelon is a traitor, yet first allows him to nominate Roland to command the rear-guard and then— curiously, since nothing in the dream warned him that this post would lead to disaster— calls Ganelon *"vis diables"* (746). *"Par Guenelon serai destruite France"* (835) he tells Naimon as the two ride north.

To say that Charles is aware that he is in a story is related to the suggestion within the narrative that he has been given a message from God. Just as, in the Bible, God sometimes gives people in the Bible knowledge of their future (which is already "written"), the writer of *The Song of Roland* has given Charles glimpses into the history of which he is a part. Whatever ideological explanation one offers for the king's sense of destiny, the method by which the poet has achieved it is the attribution of some part of his own knowledge of the story to his character. In doing so, he has brought Charles nearer to his own status as author.

In the case of Roland, the affinity is much closer. Roland's first speech, warning Charles not to negotiate with Marsilion, comes on the heels of the narrator's first bit of prescience, *"Des or comencet li conseilz que mal prist"* (179). In the narratorial compression of *laisse* 55, Charles's conquest of Spain is followed by Roland's symbolic confirmation of raising the *"enseigne"* (variously translated as the warrior's flag, his war-cry, or the name of his country). Roland is both a participant and a commentator, or, as I would suggest, a character within the story and a surrogate for its author. This duality could help explain the controversial turnabout following his assignation to the rear-guard: in *laisse* 59 he is Roland the warrior, loyal to family and eager to follow orders; in 60 he speaks venomously for the writer, who sees Ganelon for what he is.

The identity of author and hero becomes very nearly explicit in *laisse* 63. Charles has offered Roland half the army; Roland avers: *"Deus me confondet se la geste en desment!"* (788). The "history of my line" is Goldin's translation for *geste,* but the word could also assert a writer's

refusal to stray from the fact of the rear-guard's defeat as it stands in the story he has received.

Roland's refusal to sound the oliphant at the first sight of the Saracen army is one of the most baffling aspects of the entire poem. Joseph P. Duggan has called it one of "the central interpretive issues of *Roland* studies" (78). Joseph Bedier asks, "In what period of history, in what country, what leader, when taken by surprise and outnumbered by the enemy, has ever hesitated to ask for reinforcements?" (Cook, 56n). Cook uses the question to express the idea that Roland is "some sort of general," and disputes Pierre Le Gentil's imputation to Roland of "a pathological concern for his reputation . . . a *demesure* that leads him to boast when he cannot perform" (127). To see the hero as at once fighter and re-visionary, though, is to be reminded that he is not a real person but a construct of whoever created him. Could it be that what we perceive as his motivation is complicated not only by his situation within the epic and our distance from the society that produced him, but by his addressing the very nature of his own creation as well?

In this light, Roland's most compelling reason not to sound the oliphant when Oliver asks him is a simple one: he knows that he is bound by history (as it has been recorded) not to. The biblical justification "in order to fulfill the prophecy" comes to mind, only in Roland's case prophecy and action are two layers of the same text. The soldiers' abandon as they ride into battle gains great pathos from the fact that they are facing not only five-to-one odds but also the impossibility of changing the past, a past of which Roland and the audience are both aware, Oliver's thrice-repeated request is (if unwittingly) tantamount to tempting Roland to save his own life by being false to the story as it stands. In refusing, Roland is more Christ than he is Peter. Even if he had blown the horn at this point, Charles could not have heard it; any attempt to summon help that has already not come would be a futile act of cowardice.

The reasons Roland actually gives Oliver are consistent with this reading but more conventional— they are reasons Oliver might understand: it would be crazy to sound the horn, France would be shamed, we would be giving in to the pagans. His insistence on the glory of battle urges his men to make the most of the foregone conclusion that they will be defeated *("For son seignor deit hom soffrir destreiz,"* 1010). Never does he claim (as Oliver eventually does in line 1234) that they themselves will come out of this victorious or even alive, and his prediction that their enemies are bound to die proves correct.

It *is* important to realize that when Roland does finally martyr himself by sounding the oliphant he is already as good as dead at the hands of his enemies; this is the point at which "the historical Roland" was killed. Until now, it has not been possible for Charles to come to the rescue because he did not according to history: the defeat of the rear-guard is immutable, a given that the poet does not consider himself at liberty to change. We may compare his situation to that of a liberal editor who, in assembling his own edition of the Roland story, regards the loss of the rear-guard (and Roland with it) as a substantive from which he must not depart, but who feels free to alter its context radically. Roland and the poet both fight, given the rear-guard's defeat, to make the event as glorious as possible for France— Roland by killing as many Saracens as he can, the poet by couching the battle in a religious context that ends with Charles' revenge.

Laisse 110's apocalyptic catalogue of terrors has men on both sides saying, *"Co'st li definemenz"* (1434), "This is the end of all things." It dramatizes Roland's imminent death by borrowing heavily from the books of Matthew and Luke. As metatext, it simultaneously (and no less frighteningly) depicts a story to whose ending the characters themselves are witnesses. That this ending occurs near the middle of the poem implies that the vengeance Charles wreaks on the Saracens will take place "after the ending," will be apocryphal— which, in relation to the original chronicle, it in fact is. By sounding the oliphant, Roland summons Charles (who has changed from actor into audience) back into the story, in effect enabling it to survive his own death; the gesture works much in the same way a poem enables the world a poet creates in it to outlive him.

An earlier statement by Marsilion implies his strong but imperfect recognition of Roland's power: If someone could bring about the death of Charles's nephew, he schemes, "Si *remandreient les merveilloses oz"* (598). If Roland were killed before sounding the oliphant, i.e., before concretizing the world of his imagination in poetry (a possibility of which Marsilion is ignorant), then yes, the French armies would quite literally cease to exist. But so would the entire world.

If we keep in mind the connection between the oliphant and a transcribed text, we may consider Roland's sounding the alarm as the point at which his present and the present of the writer converge. In Roland's "now" the story can be told because it is over; in the writer's "now" it may finally be written down with pride because it has been given the poetic benefit of Charles' revenge— it is no longer the "poor,

bare, inglorious event" (Goldin 4) that conceived it. The comparability of the time frames of the battle (one day) and of the poem's gestation (300 years) is enhanced by the flexible and symbolic nature of time within *The Song of Roland*— King Charles, for instance, who was a young man when the battle at Rencesvals is thought to have taken place, is by the poem's reckoning *"dous cenz anz...e mielz"* (539).

Just as Roland's signal entreats Charles to *Come back, come back!,* the poem asks its audience to return to the nearly childlike simplicity of the golden age it constructs. It chastises those who would succumb, as Charles did, to the compromise of negotiation with the enemy. *"Paien ont tort e chrestien ont dreit"* (1010), and woe to him who sees any gray area between the two.

The world of *The Song of Roland* reverberates with threats to the religious and social order of its macrocosm, twelfth-century France. It also attests, by metaphor and by its own example, to the power of rhythmic speech to embody a culture's ideals in such a way that audiences within the culture will find excitement in striving toward them. But the poem has far outstripped these goals, if they ever were the writer's, by drawing the attention of audiences so far-flung that the writer's own era seems nearly as alien and inconceivable to them as the lost age of his epic. The poem continues to fascinate readers, though less exacting now of our agreement with its standards than of our appreciation of its encoding of them; as Goldin notes, we "still witness the story of a brave man keeping faith, even though his faith is not ours, and our notion of bravery is, thank God, far different from his" (8). It is as if the sound of the oliphant had gone on past Charles, already impossibly far ahead, to arouse the curiosity and admiration of foreigners too distant to be of any use or even to understand exactly what the fighting was all about.

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